

Farming for Conservation Supporting the Future

Conference Report



CONFERENCE 2008

Introduction

Generations of farming activity have shaped, enriched and sustained many of the most important high nature value landscapes in Europe. The conservation of these landscapes and their associated habitats and species depends on the continuation of sustainable farming practices. The Burren region provides an interesting example of how farming interacts with the landscape, as it is a place which has been profoundly shaped by over six thousand years of farming activity. The work of the BurrenLIFE project offers a useful case study of how the issues affecting such landscapes may be tackled in a real and meaningful way.

To explore these themes, a three day international conference entitled “Farming for Conservation - Supporting the Future” took place in Ennistymon, Co. Clare from the 24th-27th February, 2008. This report summarises the main outcomes and conclusions of the conference arising from presentations (available for download at www.burrenlife.com) and discussions. The themes explored include farming for conservation in Europe, the obstacles and practicalities surrounding farming for conservation and the future support and delivery requirements of farming for conservation.

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Farming for Conservation – Setting the scene (Session 1)

The EC have produced a preliminary distribution map of high nature value areas in Europe highlighting the importance of agriculture to the conservation of threatened European biodiversity. Biodiversity provides important ecosystem services such as the provision of goods (food, fibre, fuel and medicine) and regulation of air and water quality. An EC communication to member states (Com 2006 216 final) contains the EU action plan which sets-out priority objectives and actions to halt the loss of biodiversity by 2010 and beyond.

Agriculture has a central role to play in halting the loss of biodiversity, and measures to achieve this are incorporated in rural development programmes, cross-compliance measures and the wider common agriculture policy. It is important that policy instruments such as “less favoured areas” enhance their contribution to biodiversity. The majority of land within the Natura 2000 network is farmland or forest. EC LIFE nature funded projects have an important role to play in these areas in demonstrating best practice in biodiversity protection involving practical actions such as setting sustainable grazing levels, scrub clearance, mowing times.

The EU foresees co-financing Natura 2000 at an estimated cost of €6.1 billion over the 25 Member States. Financing opportunities are integrated into different EU funds such as LIFE+ and rural development policy (Axis 2). EU co-funding opportunities for Natura 2000 (2007-2013) are now supported by a guidance handbook and IT-tool. Rural development policy is a key tool in Ireland and the experience of BurrenLIFE needs to be incorporated into Irish agri-environment programmes.

Designation of areas as Special Areas of Conservation (SAC) under the EU habitats directive confers upon Ireland the obligation to protect its scientific interest and to manage these areas now and into the future. The National Parks and Wildlife Service (the responsible authority for nature conservation in Ireland) recognizes the threats posed by changing farming practices and the essential role that farmers and farming practices play in maintaining the conservation value of habitats. A partnership with farmers where farmers, biodiversity and the environment benefit is important in sustaining farming practices and nature conservation into the future. This poses challenges and requires input from a wide range of stakeholders to move beyond the designation phase to the effective sustainable management of Natura 2000 sites.

At a local level, the negative consequences of past agricultural policy on the nature conservation value of the Burren was recognized. This resulted in a largely negative attitude towards farming and a lack of understanding of the positive attributes of farming in the region particularly the low input winter grazing systems. However recent research has highlighted the importance of traditional pastoral systems to the heritage of the Burren and the important links between farming and flora. The BurrenLIFE project addresses the specific management needs of the Burren to develop a blueprint for sustainable agricultural management of the Habitats Directive Annex 1 priority habitats of the Burren i.e. Farming for Conservation. BurrenLIFE is a pilot project which has had notable success in the implementation of farm specific management plans on 20 participating farms. The wide range of project actions including new grazing and feeding systems, improved livestock management facilities and habitat restoration work has led to the improved conservation status of priority habitats, while shedding light on best practice methodologies and costs.

With time running out for the project the challenge is to build on the spirit of partnership and to enable the extension of farming for conservation to all interested farmers. What is the future for farming for conservation? BurrenLIFE shows a sustainable way forward for the farmers of the Burren and their heritage. With real resources and proper management, a window of opportunity exists to prevent agriculture going into terminal decline, to sustain farming traditions that have survived over thousands of years and to help farming communities to continue to produce quality food from a quality environment. The farming for conservation approach: better engagement, better recognition of each other’s roles and greater potential benefit for all.

Farming for Conservation – European Case Studies (Session 2)

Over recent years a number of initiatives have taken place in other European limestone regions to address farming for conservation issues. The case studies presented included projects from the Yorkshire Dales (UK), the Alvars of Öland (Sweden) and the Causse Méjan (France). In general, the heritage value of these areas seemed to be diminishing as a result of changes in land management practices — e.g. an increased specialisation in sheep grazing at the expense of traditional mixed grazing of upland grasslands in the Yorkshire Dales, a market-driven decline in extensive grazing of traditional breeds of sheep in the Causse Méjan region and a general decline in the use of rough alvar grasslands in Öland as production focussed on the more fertile and accessible coastal areas. In all cases, these changes have contributed to a loss in biodiversity with increased dominance of grass and occasionally shrub species (from box to juniper) at the expense of the species-rich herb flora. These changes are often visibly manifested at a landscape level and also impinge on local cultural heritage.

In all cases, LIFE Nature projects were undertaken as first steps in addressing these issues. While the approaches were different in each case, all focussed their efforts on the local farming community as the key agents for ensuring effective conservation and used farm-level management plans as the delivery mechanism for effecting change. Practical measures undertaken included scrub removal, restoration of conservation grazers (including traditional breeds of cattle and sheep); and upgrading farm infrastructure (e.g. fences, gates, watering points, animal shelters and handling facilities). In general, payments were made to cover a percentage of capital costs incurred, along with additional ‘transitional’, ‘support’ or ‘incentive’ payments to encourage longer-term changes in management practices.

These projects met with varying degrees of success and benefits were not always obvious. While the short-term impact of capital works like scrub removal was clear, their longer-term impact (in the absence of resources to maintain these areas) was less so. Also, monitoring work undertaken did not always reveal clear ecological benefits of project actions, often due to the restricted timeframe and the large number of complex factors involved. While engaging and empowering local communities as agents for conservation seems to be a key factor in whatever successes the projects enjoyed, one obvious lesson from the case studies presented was that these initiatives depended ultimately on securing additional resources to ensure post-LIFE sustainability.

Securing resources for extending project work post-LIFE proved very challenging (French example) and one solution has been to incorporate findings into National agri-envt schemes (UK). A more strategic approach was applied in Sweden with the securing of UNESCO World Heritage Site Status which gives local farmers greater confidence in the future of their agri-envt supports. In terms of alternative methods of enhancing sustainability of farming systems, initiatives around local marketing seem to have met with very limited success considering the input of resources – in the UK (conservation beef) and France (Roquefort cheese) for example.

As identified in the French example, and clear from the others, landscape is a highly complex synthesis of natural and cultural forces, and landscapes have always evolved in accordance with the socio-economic drivers of the time. The dual threats of intensification and abandonment are ultimately a reflection of recent changes in policies, markets, technologies, lifestyles and other factors. The questions must be asked: what is the ideal reference landscape that we aspire to, what was the socio-economic scenario that created and sustained it, and is the re-creation of this scenario realistic in the 21st century? Also, can such an intervention be justified or is it in itself artificial (the Disneyland effect) and thus inherently unsustainable?

A key concept in conservation farming is sustaining viable rural communities as these communities are the main stakeholders in any process and the ones with the management skills and experience to effect change. Marginal areas of high nature value such those of the case studies, have an advantage in that they have always been (by necessity) adaptive and pluriactive, and they will need to continue to be so as their landscape turns into one based largely on consumption (multi-functionality) from one based largely on production.

Farming for conservation – Obstacles and practicalities (Session 3)

An examination of the socio-economic sustainability of high nature value farming systems highlights the high labour requirements and limited returns. The market returns from cattle farms in the Objective 1 region of Ireland show negative returns, with family farm income dependent on grants and subsidies. A case study from Islay in Scotland highlights limited market returns in extensive farming for conservation systems. This emphasises the fact that farm system viability will not be achieved on the basis of market returns alone.

Current support schemes provide limited support to vulnerable farming systems. Pillar II of CAP (sustainable development of rural areas i.e. rural development and agri-environment measures) makes a relatively small contribution to farm income compared to Pillar I (market and income policy). It was pointed out that none of these supports are specifically targeted at low intensity farming on which much of the high nature value of farming depends. In essence, the choice to farm in a low-intensity way is a personal decision by the farmer rather than a response to policy incentives.

The future for the single farm payment (SFP) which contributes most significantly to family farm income is unclear in light of growing competition for EU budget resources, lack of clarity over objectives and a possible requirement for future co-financing of SFP after 2013. Agri-environment payments designed to cover income foregone; additional costs of commitment given plus an incentive element, may not be well suited to maintaining farm production systems which are inherently unprofitable. Future linking of less favoured area (LFA) compensatory allowances to management practices to ensure continued use of agricultural land in areas with natural handicaps may have a role to play in supporting farming for conservation.

In light of current limitation of support schemes, new directions need to be investigated including developing markets for environmental services. Currently the lack of markets for environmental services means that government must estimate both the level of demand and the price to offer farmers for supply. The challenge is how to estimate demand and how extensive are the environmental services that the public wants to buy? The lessons learnt from agri-environmental schemes to date highlight much higher participation rate among less-intensive farmers where minimum changes to management practices are required.

Current schemes are not performance linked and payments linked to income foregone assume there is a viable farm business in place to carry out agri-environmental measures. In many areas agri-environment does not place a higher monetary value on things of higher biological value – so farmers earn more per hectare for a silage field than for an herb-rich marshland. Essentially the payment rates are based on profit foregone to change to a low-intensity system, rather than the scheme paying for the nature product.

Deciding how much to pay farmers to ensure a scheme is attractive without overpaying is a major challenge. A number of alternative ways of paying for environmental services have been trialled in different countries including tendering schemes and environmental co-operatives where groups can plan at the landscape level rather than individual farm level. Marginal farming areas are under pressure, threatening land abandonment and loss of environmental benefits. CAP reform has put increased emphasis on the maintenance of environmental services from farming at the extensive margin. This results in significant transfers to agriculture but is this properly targeted and sustainable in its current form?

Currently there is little to encourage low-intensity farming. For those committed to farming for conservation the benefits are mostly non-economic. There is much work needed on the design of agri-environmental contracts to make farming for conservation a reality at a scale needed for there to be real benefits for nature conservation.

Farming for Conservation – Support requirements (Session 4)

A range of support requirements are necessary for the effective delivery of conservation farming, in all of the traditional farming sectors e.g. beef, dairy, tillage. Among the key areas where support is, and will be, required are the development of effective advisory, research and monitoring programmes. Currently, significant resource and information deficits exist in each of these areas, greatly undermining the delivery of farming for conservation within existing, and proposed future, agri-environment schemes.

In Ireland to date, the responsibility for the conservation of natural heritage has largely fallen within the remit of the environmental authorities. However, there are significant opportunities for the agricultural advisory and research sectors to play their part in the development of conservation farming systems on areas of high nature value farmland – and thereby enhance prospects for their farmer clients in these areas. This will present new challenges to farming bodies and will require the instigation of new research, the up-skilling of advisors and the restructuring of existing advisory services, as well as the formation of new strategic alliances with the environmental and NGO sectors.

In terms of support requirements for conservation farming, practical research and evidence-based evaluation are essential in targeting schemes and actions, in informing advisory services and in assuaging the concerns of the taxpayer and policymaker in terms of the effectiveness and value for money of such schemes and actions. It is critical that such research and monitoring must generate useable data and be targeted and tailored to suit local agricultural and environmental conditions. A practical - and where possible innovative - approach in terms of research and monitoring is essential in ensuring adoption by the end-user, in this case the farmer. Testing this research in the real time scenario of local farms, as per BurrenLIFE, is also important in ensuring its robustness, and in securing its eventual uptake within the local region.

In terms of advisory services for conservation farming, European Environment Agency research and practical experience suggests that such services must be participatory, built on local knowledge and research, and be highly adaptive. Advice should be participatory in terms of drawing on the expertise and experience of all stakeholders - from farmer to conservationist to consumer – in delivering agreed objectives. They should be flexible or adaptive enough to cater for the diversity within and between farms, as well as the rapidly changing policies, markets and technologies beyond the farm gate. But perhaps most importantly, these services should be locally grounded, ideally along the lines of a local ‘one stop shop’ where integrated advice and support services could be dispensed. For farmers, having a public ‘face’ for conservation farming within the region enhances pride and ownership of the concept and its rationale to a far greater extent than a top-down approach.

For conservation farmers themselves there are also many needs to be met; training and networking are important tools for delivering support to these farmers. Effective training may provide them with some necessary skills for conservation farming work. Establishing networks – as in the organic sector – may also help these ‘marginal’ producers with problem solving, generate moral support and ensure that they have a stronger voice to communicate their needs.

Of course, the delivery of such support requirements will be resource dependent. A more holistic and strategic approach to farming for conservation in a region may facilitate increased levels of support and resources from a wider stakeholder group. Such an approach acknowledges that the high conservation status of an area is a significant resource for a range of users, but equally that sustaining this resource requires, and justifies, input from an equally diverse complement of stakeholders. These may include local authorities, tourism and rural development organisations. As evident from the Öland case study (Session 2), an umbrella ‘designation’ may be one tool to facilitate longer-term strategic planning at a landscape level which may unlock resources and improve co-ordination of activity between a range of stakeholder agencies.

Looking forward – Supporting the delivery of Farming for Conservation (Session 6)

As identified in previous sessions, securing long term support for farming for conservation initiatives such as BurrenLIFE, is one of the main challenges faced by such projects. Some options for support were explored in this session.

The BurrenLIFE project and its associated farmer-led producer group share an aspiration of producing quality food from a quality environment. Realising a fair return for these high quality products and services poses considerable difficulties however due to factors such as the many environmental services not having been properly valued, quality local food products struggling against globalisation of the marketplace and increased hygiene and food safety regulations. Marketing the produce of areas of high nature value is particularly challenging as usually these areas are marginal agriculturally and so sustaining year-round production is problematic, particularly at the level demanded by major retailers. High levels of co-ordination and commitment are also crucial, but difficult to sustain, and there is a tendency for groups to be initially enthusiastic but naive.

Agri-environmental support is the main mechanism at present for sustaining farming for conservation. There is clear variation in the level at which these schemes operate across Europe in terms of their baseline ('entry level') standards, the levels to which they aspire, and indeed the extent to which they are monitored and revised accordingly. Clearly, future agri-environment schemes will have to have a greater environmental impact (more enhancement) as the cross-compliance baseline ('maintenance') standard continues to increase.

Future schemes will very likely require measurable targets to be met, targets which will include the maintenance, restoration and enhancement of habitats, species and features. Though this may place additional demands on the farmer, it will be the only way to justify and secure existing payment levels. For example, the Northern Ireland scenario requires that the farmer undertakes (and is paid for) initial capital works such as scrub removal before an area of limestone grassland is eligible for ongoing payment, and that payments are increased based on the biodiversity value of the habitat, thus rewarding past management and incentivising positive future management.

Another interesting feature of the Northern Ireland scheme is the competitive nature of this scheme – while farmers in designated areas are automatically eligible, those outside must bid to enter the scheme, within which places are limited. In another interesting new development, farmers also are allowed to nominate their own 'special environmental projects' for consideration, empowering the farmer in the decision making, planning and delivery process.

The concept of High Nature Value (HNV) farming moves beyond the agri-environment approach – the latter is largely concerned with protecting the environment from farming, whereas HNV sees farming as critical to the support of natural (and cultural) heritage values. HNV was originally conceived as a mechanism to transfer resources to areas of lower-intensity farming in marginal areas where the environmental output was greater. However, it has largely failed to do so since its conception some 15 years ago and, if anything, agricultural policies have placed greater pressure on HNV areas since then. In recent years however, HNV has become well integrated into agricultural and environmental policies and looks to have gained real momentum.

HNV works to keeping farmers actively farming the land and inputting into the development and delivery of viable conservation farming systems. Indicators of HNV farmland may include livestock density, diversity in land uses and proportion of semi-natural vegetation cover. While EC-wide indicative maps for HNV have been prepared it is only at the local-regional level that HNV farmland can be accurately mapped and appropriate and targeted measures developed. Though HNV is a EC-wide concept, its delivery needs to be local – ideally using a local project office and engaging with local stakeholders. Through the new LEADER model there may be ways of establishing local agencies to deliver agri-envt and investment aid to HNV areas such as is the case with BurrenLIFE.

Discussion – key points (Session 5 and 7)

While concepts such as ‘High Nature Value Farming’ have gained much currency across Europe in recent years, particularly in the policy arena, the BurrenLIFE project offers an excellent example of what might be achieved when such concepts are applied at ground level, involving those at the very coalface of conservation farming – the farmers themselves, working in partnership with other stakeholders.

Key aspects to the success thus far of the BurrenLIFE project would include the strong level of involvement of local farmers in the planning and delivery of conservation works, and the realisation for those farmers of a fair economic return for their input of time, energy and skill. Tailoring actions to meet the unique needs of the Burren landscape, while also recognising and addressing practical management priorities at the individual farm level, are equally critical in terms of securing farmer support and meeting conservation goals. Having a locally-based delivery mechanism – dealing with administration, planning and monitoring of schemes – to which stakeholders to have ready access is another key point, and offsets existing antipathy to schemes imposed from ‘outside’ by ‘faceless bureaucrats’.

To roll out the work of pilot projects such as BurrenLIFE to more farmers over a longer time is a huge challenge which will require careful planning and adequate resourcing. This requires a long term vision and a roadmap for the realisation of this vision, for example a series of five year programmes with measurable goals in phased plans. Such long-term programmes must be innovative and adaptive to changing socio-economic, environmental and wider agricultural policies.

Securing adequate resources for long term planning will be the key to success. Labour intensive farming for conservation is essential to preserve high nature value farmland. Farmers need to be able to earn an income from farming for conservation to ensure its sustainability and the preservation of landscapes like the Burren for future generations. Other related areas in which significant resources will be needed include research, monitoring, advisory, training and networking.

In terms of securing resources, we need to move away from the culture of compensation, grants and subsidies to payment for services provided. Existing studies have shown consumers willingness to pay for environmental services provided by farmers so it is important to present conservation farmers as ‘service providers’ in the broadest and most positive sense, and it is vital that their voice be heard. Moreover, in the context of the Burren, the region is significantly under-resourced when compared with equivalent heritage landscapes in the UK and elsewhere.

Multiple funding streams, married through local administrative structures, will be needed to realise farming for conservation. Innovative approaches must be applied to capture revenue for conservation farming from tourism, markets and environmental service provision. Only some farmers may be in position to tap into direct tourism market revenue, however we need innovative solutions to support local communities who are providing landscape and environmental products that tourists and the general public want.

In conclusion, there is an increasing level of consensus on the need to support farming systems on areas of high nature value in order that the natural and cultural qualities of those landscapes be preserved and their ecosystem services be maintained. As such areas – including the Burren – are increasingly marginalised in agricultural terms, this presents quite a challenge. The BurrenLIFE project shows that there is a way forward for farming for conservation, but that successful pilots such as this will amount to nothing if proper planning and resources are not invested by the large range of stakeholders – from agriculture to environment to rural development -for whom this approach is relevant.